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M'NAMARA LEANS TO NEW DEFENSE AGAINST BOMBERS

$4-Billion Airborne Radar and Plane System Would Aim at Soviet Threat

MAJOR SAVING EXPECTED

Plan, Which Follows Call for Antimissile Net, Would Cut Annual Cost $500-Million

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 24—The Johnson Administration, which only last week announced a decision to provide some defense of the continent against missile attack, is seriously considering a total revamping of its defense against enemy bombers.

Pentagon officials say that Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara is looking favorably toward the possible replacement of much of the air defense structure, involving hundreds of jet fighters and ground-based radars, with an entirely new $4-billion system.

The system would include constantly airborne radar picket planes employing a new type of radar, together with a either the A-11 spy plane or the F-111, formerly known as the TFX.

Focus on China

In announcing the decision to deploy the $5-billion Nike-X, Mr. McNamara said that a defense against Soviet missiles was impossible, but not so against the much smaller, projected intercontinental ballistic missile of Communist China.

Though ICBM's constitute much the greater part of the potential Soviet threat to the United States, the new air defense system would be meant to defend primarily against Russian bombers. The Chinese do not have long-range bombers.

Defense officials explained the seeming paradox this way:

The existing air defense system costs more than $1-billion to operate each year. The new system would save about $500-million a year in operating costs and thus pay for its $4-billion initial cost in about eight years.

'Free Ride' Feared

Said one planner:

"Since we're going to continue having an air defense, we might as well go to the new one, which promises to be a lot better and a lot cheaper."

In past years Mr. McNamara always considered the possibility of new air defenses in terms of over-all defense. He repeatedly told Congress that if the United States went ahead with a massive Nike-X system to guard against Russian missiles, it should then also put a lot more money into bomber defenses, fallout shelters and possibly antisubmarine defenses.

For the first time, however, improved bomber defenses are being considered independent of other elements of continental defense, primarily because of the estimated savings.

If the United States abandons

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its air defense, officials say, the Russians or any other attacker will be provided with a "free ride" through the nation's other defenses. Though planes are a lot slower than missiles, they can carry a much bigger load of nuclear weapons.

Sources credit the Russians with about 210 long-range, four-engine Bison and Bear bombers and 800 to 900 Badger and Blinder medium-range bombers.

The medium bombers, which would more likely be employed in Europe or Asia, could reach the United States with aerial refueling or on one-way missions.

The Soviet Union also has about 450 ICBM's, a force that is believed to be increasing at a rate of approximately 150 a year, and about 130 submarine-based missiles.

The Chinese are not believed to be developing any long-range bombers. Intelligence analysts estimate that they may have their first operational ICBM by around 1970 and from 25 to 75 missiles by 1975.

The key to the new American air defense is a computerized-radar system known as the Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS. Since enemy aircraft would be expected to fly toward the United States at low altitude, hoping to fly beneath the view of land-based radar, the system is designed to look down from high altitude, scanning the land and sea for earth-hugging bombers.

Radar Versions Tested

Officials say that three versions of the system's radar are being tested, with high hopes for success. Earlier this year, Mr. McNamara told Congress he thought the system could be developed successfully.

If so, he said, he and Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, leaned toward the interceptor version of the A-11, called the F-12, over the F-111.

"A small force of such aircraft operating with AWACS," he said, "would have a combat capability superior to the programed force of several hundred fighters and the hundreds of ground radar and control sites."

The current air defense system includes 15 squadrons of F-101B's, 11 squadrons of F-106's and one squadron each of F-102's and F-104's. These planes range in speed from about 800 to 1,400 miles an hour.

The F-12 is rated at 2,000 to 2,500 miles an hour—more than three times the speed of sound—and the F-111 at about 1,700 miles an hour. These two also have greater ranges than existing planes and are being designed to carry much longer-range, more sophisticated air-to-air missiles.

Plan Detailed

As currently conceived, starting in the early nineteen-seventies a relatively small number of large, slow airplanes equipped with AWACS radar, computers and communications equipment would fly picket runs along the periphery of the United States.

Each plane would stay in the air about eight hours; three on each station would provide round-the-clock coverage.

Being airborne, they would be difficult to knock out in a surprise attack. When they spotted something suspicious, they would call in interceptors to check out the contact.

The F-12 or the F-111 interceptor could react much more speedily than present planes and cover a larger territory. Their missiles would be able to counteract not only enemy bombers, but also air-to-ground missiles fired by those bombers.